

THE LIFE OF SOCRATES.

BY WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD.

[CONCLUSION.]

IV.

Meantime there were those who began to look askance: this Socrates is not only erratic, but meddlesome; not only meddlesome, but dangerous.

In 423, in the ninth year of the Peloponnesian war, and twenty-four years before his death, the son of Sophroniscus, now a man of forty-seven, saw himself ridiculed from the stage of the Dionysiac theater—the platform of Greece. The father of philosophy had fallen into the youthful and merciless hands of the greatest satirist and the greatest comic poet of the ancient world. Through the *Clouds*, Aristophanes, harking back, with that conservative spirit characteristic of satire to

“The men who fought at Marathon”

in fine ethical nature-verse touched with the love of Athens, attacks in the person of Socrates atheistic doctrines of physicists, immoral instruction of sophists, and incidentally all unprofitable studies. The *Clouds* are the aery speculations which Socrates here calls his deities, giving him

“Fallacious cunning and intelligence.”

He has thrown over the old gods—

“What Zeus?—nay jest not—there is none,”

and he has ready his “rationalistic” explanation of thunder and rain. In Socrates’s school (obviously an invention of the poet for dramatic convenience) they study how far fleas can leap, from which end of their bodies gnats sing, besides mysteries of astron-

omy, grammar, and versification. The same Chaerephon who is said to have brought back the oracle's response is here with other disciples, and all duly revere the wondrous sage. What is that?—asks the visiting rustic, bewildered, as Socrates, on his first entrance on the stage, floats into the chamber in a basket. *Autos*, is the solemn response—*autos*, "himself." But old Strepsiades has not come up from the country to learn the natural sciences or to join the disciples—or even to clean out the Corinthian bugs that infest the couches of the crazy place. He wants practical instruction how to evade by sophistical reasonings the creditors whom his extravagant son—a type of the smart and smug young sport of Athens—has



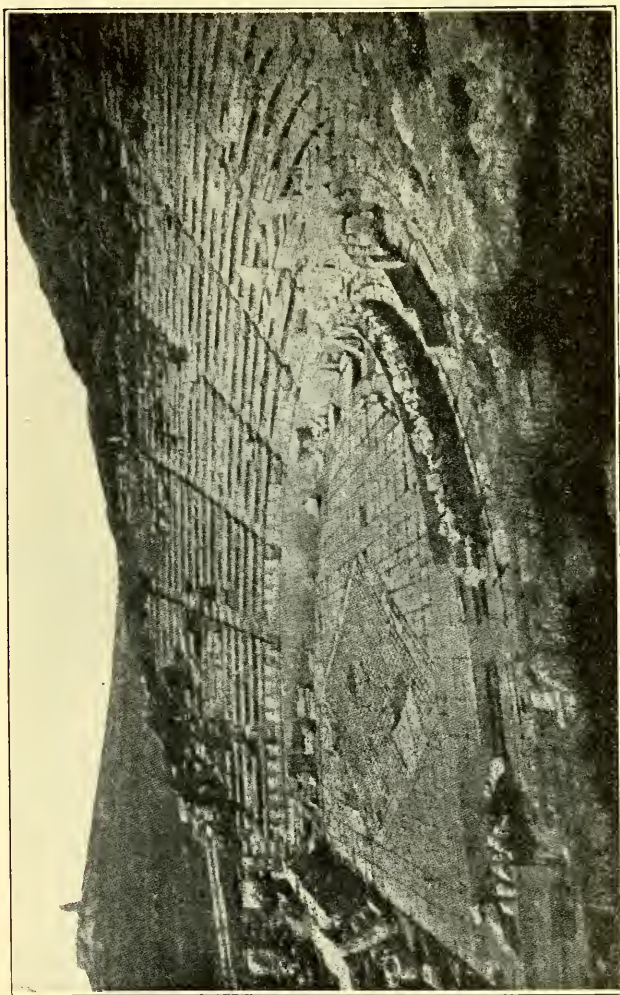
THEATER AND PRECINCT OF DIONYSUS.

From the Acropolis.

brought buzzing round his ears. Socrates, finding him hopelessly stupid, has him fetch, as a likelier pupil, the son, Phidippides himself, and the old fellow soon "gets him back," as the sage had promised, "a dexterous sophist" indeed, who beats his sire, old foggy that he is, in a quarrel touching the merits of Euripides (whom the satirist couples again with Socrates in the *Frogs*, of date 405), and then proves by argument that his conduct is just. The denouement is swift and complete: Strepsiades, his aged shanks still aching and his poor brain amuddle, in revenge sets fire to the school of Socrates and smokes out the whole cult. Thus, whatever hostility Aristophanes may show by the way, it is clear that he intends as primary

that charge which is inherent in the plot itself, where Socrates appears as playing fast and loose with the logic of moral conduct and corrupting the civic honesty and fireside humility of the young men.

This is the episode of 423 so far as it concerns biography.



DIONYSIAC THEATER FROM THE EAST.

The bearing of the brilliant burlesque on Socrates's thought and character we can consider, if need be, in later chapters.

What may have been the effect of the *Clouds* on Socrates we have no means of telling. He may well have been amused; it is

possible that he at some time exchanged jests with the author over the wine as in Plato's Symposium. To the professional satirist, especially when he clothes his comments in the fantastic creations of a tale and the remoter language of poetry, much has always been forgiven; and the personal jibe was the familiar custom in the old comedy. Moreover, though Aristophanes is certainly expressing a serious conviction, the spirit of mirth is here regnant over bitterness and spite. It is the large laughter of Dryden, not the stinging sneer of Pope. Nor could Socrates have realized, looking forward, as he must have come to realize, looking back in his last days (Apology of Plato) that the fun his unique habits of life and thought furnished the comic poets (for Eupolis¹ and others beside Aristophanes appropriated him) was sowing the seed from the mature plant of which the drops of hemlock would one day be distilled. This is not the only case on record, though the chief, where human laughter has ended in human tears. But assuredly Socrates left the comic poets to themselves: they worked their work, he his. About twenty years later, if we credit Xenophon (Memorabilia, I, 2) Critias, still nursing an old grudge against his quondam teacher for an ugly vice publicly rebuked, got the despicable Thirty of whom he was the leader, to pass a law "against teaching the art of words," aimed against Socrates. Shortly afterward, a caustic comment on their wholesale slaughter of the first citizens to the effect that "it was a sorry cowherd who would kill off his own cattle" caused him to be summoned before Critias and his fellow-member Charicles, and reminded peremptorily of the edict. Xenophon represents Socrates imperturbably and archly asking questions on its exact meaning and scope and just what he may talk about anyway, the dialogue concluding:

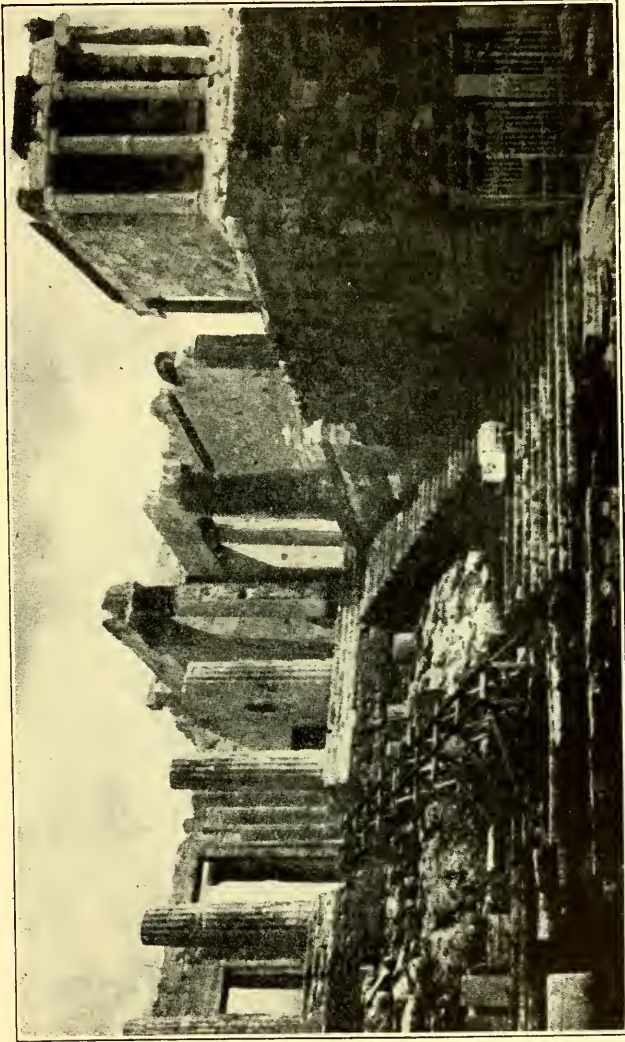
Charicles: . . . "But at the same time you had better have done with your shoemakers, carpenters, and coppersmiths. These must be pretty well trodden out at heel by this time, considering the circulation you have given them."—*Socrates*: "And am I to hold away from their attendant topics also—the just, the holy, and the like?"—*Charicles*: "Most assuredly, and from *cowherds* in particular; or else see that you do not lessen the number of the herd yourself."

We have already observed Socrates disobeying the Thirty at the risk of his life.² Their hatred of him certainly had a deeper

¹ Eupolis seems to have been particularly sharp: in one fragment a character says, "I too hate this Socrates, the beggar of a twaddler"; and another fragment hints at criminal conduct (atheism?) and advises burning him in the cross-ways.

source than the spite of their leader; they too worked their work, he his.

But for all their bloodshed, the execution of Socrates was to be reserved for others. Democracy, in one more effort to vindicate



THE PROPYLAEA ON THE ACROPOLIS.

itself as the highest principle of government among mankind, has once more control in Athens, as we come to the one remaining date in Socrates's career that has been preserved for posterity.

We are there in the year 399 before Christ. We see little

groups talking in the street. We see an ever shifting crowd at the portico before the office of the second archon. Now a scholar with book-roll in the folds of his mantle, now an artisan with saw and square, now a farmer with a basket of fruit, now a pair of young dandies, with staffs in their hands and rings on their fingers, cross over and, having edged near enough for a look at the parchment hung up on the wall, go their ways, some with the heartlessness of jest or of pitying commonplaces, some with the sorrow and indignation of true hearts.

We see, also, an old man of seventy years coming down the step. He, too, has had a look, but from the whimsical wrinkles on his cheek and brow we cannot make out what he thinks of it. A number of urchins follow after him hooting.

It seems that Meletus, instigated by Anytus and Lycon, has done this thing; and on the parchment which he but this morning affixed in the portico are the following words:

“INDICTMENT.

“Socrates is guilty of crime: first for not worshipping the gods whom the city worships, but introducing new divinities of his own; next for corrupting the youth. Penalty: DEATH.”

Tradition has it that Socrates had offended Anytus, a rich dealer in leather, by trying to dissuade him from bringing up his talented son in his father's profession, Anytus being, besides, a leading politician and one of the helpers of Thrasybulus in expelling Critias and the Thirty. But it would be a superficial reading of history to see in Anytus more than the unenviable symbol or spokesman of a hostility that had been gathering head for over a generation, and the wonder is that it reserved its indictment so long. In no other city of the ancient world, as Grote was presumably the first to point out, would there have been that long toleration of such individual dissent of opinion, taste, and behavior. If Athens needed a Socrates, no less did a Socrates need an Athens; nor has history a parallel to such reciprocal opportunity between a citizen and his city. The forces that finally destroyed Socrates should not blind us to this.

Those forces may be speedily set down. There were the popular prejudices and vagrom misconceptions of the conservative or ignorant, gentlemen of the old school and nondescript proletariat, who saw in Socrates the father of the rascalities of Alcibiades and Critias, and the clever humbug of the stage of the Dionysiac theater.

There was the personal resentment of no small number of influential men (if we make shrewd use of the hints in our source-books), whose pretensions had been exploded by the Socratic wit or mocked by the Socratic irony; and truth has ever been a nauseous drug in the belly of Sham, nor always a cure. Lycon the rhetorician, and Meletus, the poet, may have been among them. There was, again, the democratic reaction at the turn of the century, dangerous to Socrates not only as giving free play to the forces named, but, like any defeated party again in power, as peculiarly suspicious of moral or political heresy. Socrates at this time (if not, as seems likely, also in early years) exercised his ethical influence chiefly on young men; and he was suspected of aristocratic sympathies, from the political character of some of his associates and from such not very dark sayings as that on the folly of electing ships'-pilots by lot.

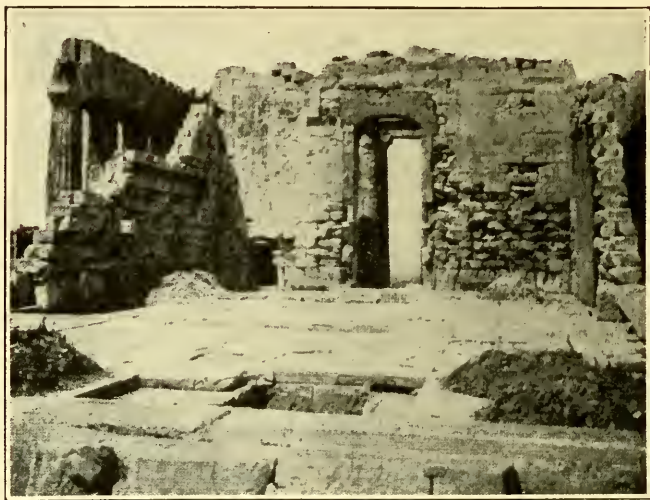
Yet, so high his reputation for goodness and wisdom, so loyal and earnest his friends, that even now he might have escaped the worst, had it not been for his own lofty indifference. He seems as one driven to furnish to the aftertimes the logical conclusion of such a life:

“Die wenigen, die von der Wahrheit was erkannt,
Und thöricht genug ihr volles Herz nicht wahrten,
Dem Pöbel ihr Gefühl, ihr Schauen offenbarten.
Hat man von je gekreuzigt und verbrannt.”

The orator Lysias is said to have offered him a written speech, which he refused. His warning voice checked him, it is said, whenever he himself meditated what tactics to employ. And to a friend urging him to prepare a defense he is reported to have answered, “Do I not seem to have been preparing that my whole life long?” And so he continued “conversing and discussing everything rather than the pending suit,” until sun rose on the day of the trial.

The dicasts are assembled, some five hundred citizen judges over thirty years of age, ultimately owing their positions merely to the chance of choice by lot—a supreme court of idlers, artisans, and everybodies. The accusers speak; they reiterate the old charges: Men of Athens, behold the infidel, behold the corrupter of your sons. Socrates, rising, disdains the customary appeals for clemency, which even Pericles is said to have stooped to when Aspasia had been indicted before the dicastery for impiety: not merely because such whimpering is contrary to the laws—but because it is contrary to Socrates. He reviews his life. He is eloquent, uncompromising,

unperturbed. The vote is taken on the question of guilt, and the verdict is against him by an encouragingly small majority. Socrates is now offered according to custom an opportunity to suggest his punishment. He has still a fair chance to live. His friends anxiously await his reply—will he jest himself into eternity?—or will he preach, where he ought to beg? My punishment?—let it be a place in the prytaneum, the public dining hall, where you entertain at the expense of the state members of the council, ambassadors, and at times those private citizens whom, as owing most to, you most delight to honor. Then, as if they perhaps wished an alternative, he suggests a modest fine—a mina; but “Plato, Crito, Critobulus



INTERIOR OF THE PARTHENON.

and Apollodorus, my friends here, bid me say thirty minae, and they will be the sureties.” The second vote is taken, and eighty who had just before voted him innocent are added to that majority which now condemns him to death. It seems he is rising again: “The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death....” As to the hereafter—perhaps....if eternal sleep, good; if a journey to another place, good.... “What infinite delight would there be in conversing with” the great dead.... “In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions”.... “Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know of a certainty, that no evil can befall a good man whether he be alive or dead”.... “But

the hour of departure is at hand, and we go our ways—I to die, you to live; but which of us unto the better affair remains hid from all save the Divine ($\tau\omega\ \Theta\epsilon\omega$)."

Such are the hints from Plato's Apology, a document which, as I have indicated before, though it can no longer be accepted as stenography, must never lose in men's eyes its essential value as the most eminent disciple's testimony to the extraordinary character of his master's conduct and speech on that impressive occasion—for here Plato is putting forth no one of his own peculiar



THE SO-CALLED PRISON OF SOCRATES.

Part of an ancient dwelling.

doctrines, and here, if anywhere, piety would tip his pen once and again with the recollected word and cadence. His witness is borne out by the lesser disciple; and Xenophon says (*Memorabilia*, IV, 8) that the defense was "happy in its truthfulness, its freedom, its rectitude"; and that "he bore the sentence of condemnation with infinite gentleness and manliness." There exists no tradition or assertion to the contrary; and Cicero (*De Oratore*, I, 54) long ago phrased what is likely to remain the permanent judgment of mankind: *Socrates ita in judicio capitis pro se ipse dixit, ut non supplex*

aut reus, sed magister aut dominus videretur esse iudicum—"he spoke not as suppliant or defendant but as master and lord of his judges."

He lay a month in prison; for it was "the holy season of the mission to Delos." Phaedo explains the circumstance to Eche- crates at Phlius: "The stern of the ship which the Athenians send



SOCRATES IN PRISON.
From the painting by Neide.

to Delos happened to have been crowned on the day before he was tried. . . .the ship in which, according to Athenian tradition, Theseus went to Crete when he took with him the fourteen youths, and was the saviour of them and himself. And they are said to have vowed to Apollo at the time that, if they were saved, they would send a yearly mission to Delos. . . .Now . . .the whole period of the voyage

is a holy season, during which the city is not allowed to be polluted by public executions....” Let the irony of the situation be remarked without bitterness or rhetoric: the imaginative but fatuous city punctiliously guarding against a formal and meaningless blasphemy only to blaspheme against truth by slaying its prophet.

He spent these days in conversation with the Socratic circle. Means of escape to foreign parts seem to have been arranged for by his friends, which as all the generations know, he firmly declined, though men begin to doubt if his reasons as given in the *Crito* be not primarily Platonic. He would not disobey the laws, but more than that he would not and he could not, by a kind of cowardice which would have ever after thrown its shadow back upon seventy brave years of loyalty to himself, violate the logic of his being. “Socrates did well to die,” said Shelley, speaking for all of us; and martyrdom was not the least part of his mission to men.

The last day is the subject of the *Phaedo*. There is a sublime beauty and justice in Plato’s electing this solemn time for putting into the mouth of Socrates his own doctrines of immortality, though metempsychosis and the ideas were very far from the simple “perhaps” and the ethical trust of the more historic Socrates in the *Apology*. But, when the argument is over, the realism of art seems to draw close to that of poignant and immediate fact. Socrates has bathed to save trouble for those who would have to care for the corpse, and dismissed poor Xanthippe and the children “that they might not misbehave” at the crisis. The jailer appears—“Be not angry with me. . . . you know my errand.” Then, bursting into tears, he turns away and goes out, as the condemned answers his good wishes and farewells. The sun sets behind the hill-tops, visible possibly from the prison windows. “Raising the cup to his lips, quite readily and cheerfully he drinks off the poison.” The friends weep and cry out; it is Socrates, with the venom working through the stiffening limbs up to the old heart, who comforts and consoles them. Now he has lain down and covered himself over. Perhaps the sobs are hushed in the strain of the ultimate suspense. He throws back the sheet from his face: “*Crito*, I owe a cock to *Asclepius*; will you remember to pay the debt?” These, adds Plato, were his last words, the paganism of which so distressed his admirers in the early Christian church, who failed to see their playful and pathetic gratitude to the god of health who has now—cured him of all earthly ills.

Were the people of the planet, wearied with erecting statues of the admirals and cavaliers, to set up in some city, more en-

lightened than the rest, a memorial to this hero of their ancestral stock, they should cause to be carved upon one oblong of the base, beside honest sayings of the sage's own upon the other three: "*No one within the memory of men ever bowed his head more beautifully to Death.*" The judgment was true when Xenophon wrote it down; and it were to-day far more true than most that is graven in bronze or stone, though since then countless millions have met Death where he came, at the stake, on the scaffold, in the mountains, in the highway, in the house; some with curses, some with exaltation, some with terror, and many with calm courage and noble peace.